The race into space between the United States and the Soviet Union was in full swing in the early 1960s. Both countries had successfully launched artificial satellites into space. These satellites had orbited around the Earth. The Soviet Union had successfully launched a living being into space. It had put a dog named Laika into orbit around the Earth. The Sputnik satellite carrying Laika orbited the Earth for 163 days beginning in late 1957. Laika, however, died about a week into the trip. There was no known way of retrieving an orbital satellite at that time. It was not a surprise to the Soviets that she did not survive.

The next step in the quest to conquer space would be to put a human being into orbit. No one knew for sure what effect space travel would have on humans. Would weightlessness affect how the human brain worked? Would the pressure at take-off keep a man from being able to do the tasks that needed to be done? There were no volunteers in the Soviet Union who wanted to find out. None, that is, until Yuri Gagarin stepped up.

Yuri Alekseevich Gagarin was born to a collective farm carpenter and his wife. The farm was west of Moscow. Yuri had no desire to become a carpenter. He went to technical school and studied how to use metals. He decided to pursue a higher education by going to an industrial college. It was while he was in college that he developed a love of planes. He wanted to learn everything he could about flying. After college he joined the Soviet Air Force. He very quickly became the best pilot they had. He became a test-pilot. He loved flying newly invented aircraft to see if they would work.

Yuri learned of the Soviet Union's plan to win the Space Race. He wanted to be part of the competition. He volunteered to fly the first vehicle launched into space carrying a human. No one else had volunteered for this dangerous mission.

In April 1961, Yuri's wish came true. He was placed into the capsule of the Vostok I rocket. One hundred and eight minutes after the capsule was launched, Yuri was back on Earth. He had made one complete trip around the Earth. He had reported back to Earth. His words, "I see Earth. It's so beautiful!" show the awe he was feeling. Yuri Gagarin had no control over the flight he took. Russian scientists were not convinced that a human would be able to control the ship during take-off, weightlessness, and reentry into the Earth's atmosphere.

The space capsule landed in a field in a sparsely populated area. The capsule would have landed too hard for a human to endure. Gagarin parachuted from an altitude of about 7,000 meters. That's a little more than four miles up. The atmosphere is extremely cold at that altitude. Gagarin had a space suit that would protect him from the cold.
Yuri Gagarin received a hero’s welcome in his home. He received many medals and honors for his bravery. After his historic flight, he returned to testing aircraft for the Soviet Air Force. He died doing the job he loved when his airplane crashed in 1968.

Yuri Gagarin - First Man in Space

Questions

1. The United States and Poland were in a race to be first in outer space.
   A. false
   B. true

2. What did Gagarin study in school?
   A. carpentry
   B. space
   C. flying
   D. metals

3. What did Yuri Gagarin do after he finished college?
   A. He joined the Army.
   B. He joined the Air Force.
   C. He went back to the farm.
   D. He flew in space.

4. Gagarin had to compete against hundreds of volunteers to become the first man in space.
   A. true
   B. false

5. How many orbits around Earth did Gagarin make?
   A. one
   B. three
   C. two
   D. one hundred eight

6. How did Gagarin return to Earth? What dangers were there?

7. What did Gagarin do after his flight around the Earth?
   A. He became president of the Soviet Union.
   B. He wrote a book about his adventures.
   C. He went back to being a test pilot.
   D. He flew two more space missions.